

Combat Photographer

The Vietnam Experience

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and the editors of Boston Publishing Company

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Cameras at War

Photography joined the army in the middle of the nineteenth century, while the art was still in its infancy, and it quickly became an indispensable part of military life. The union of photography and war was natural and inevitable though not always harmonious. More than words and sketches, photographs satisfied the public's intense curiosity about the state of war. They gave the chronicler and historian accurate records; they gave the soldier immutable memories. Photographs also gave the military ammunition for fighting public relations battles on the home front. Pictures of war can be instrumental in swaying public opinion, a lesson that was learned over a century ago and that backfired on the U.S. in Vietnam.

One of the first official uses of photography in war was aimed at recouping public support for Britain's war in the Crimea. Accounts in the *Times* of London of the dismal conditions at the front helped topple a government, and the new cabinet needed to quiet the dissent and rally the public behind the war effort. The young science of photography was chosen to battle the damning words of the *Times*, and in 1855 professional photographer Roger Fenton was dispatched to the Crimea with the mission of bringing back proof that the war was not going all that badly for the British. His innocuous images had the desired effect, establishing that, on one hand, people tend to trust photographs more than words and, on the other hand, that the camera can lie through its operator's choice of subject.

Since the Crimean War, photographers have followed armies and armies have used photographers, first hiring professionals such as Fenton and later recruiting and training them for the uniformed ranks. While civilian Mathew Brady was the photographic "star" of the American Civil War, the Union army and the Confederate army both employed photographers for documentary and reconnaissance purposes. Brady was essentially a free-lancer, operating under the authorization of President Lincoln to photograph the Union side of the war. Despite his place in history, Brady was not successful financially, having to rely on print sales to support his operation, which employed as many as twenty photographers at one time. Public demand for the war pictures was much lower than

Brady had anticipated, both during and after the war. In 1873 Brady was in financial ruin, and his plates were auctioned off to pay overdue storage charges. The War Department bought the lot for under \$3,000. Ironically, that same year the *New York Daily Graphic* became the first newspaper to use photographic illustration—a development that might have made Brady's work profitable had it come along earlier.

The photographer in uniform was an integral part of the major powers' military forces by the turn of the century and rose to primary importance in World War I. The military photographer virtually had the field to himself in the Great War, as civilian war correspondents and cameramen were barred from the fighting fronts. The photographs were tightly controlled by the military, and few were seen by the public until after the war. Even when the pictures were finally brought to light, most of the photographers remained anonymous, a condition of military photography that largely persists even today.

Technical advances in photography and an increasing awareness of its importance led to the incredibly voluminous photodocumentation of the second world war by both the Allied and Axis forces. The U.S. military photo effort started slowly but steadily increased until photo teams were attached to all combat units of the army, navy, and air force. These military photographers covered every phase and front of the war, sending back to Washington such quantities of pictures that to this day the material has reportedly not all been seen and catalogued. To the U.S. effort, add the photographic output of the British, French, German, Russian, and Japanese militaries, and the total soars to uncounted millions of images. Although the military photographers had much greater access to the fighting and took far more pictures than civilian press photographers, most of their material remained under wraps until after the war, and when the pictures were released the photographers themselves remained anonymous.

By the end of World War II, war photography was approaching its centennial. The technical advances of that century made possible the quantity and quality of

Roger Fenton's photographic darkroom van used during the Crimean War, 1854.



*Roger Fenton photographic darkroom van
Used during British-Crimean War in 1854*

the coverage of World War II, the kind of coverage of which the early war photographers could not have even dreamed. The earliest cameras, while bulky and cumbersome by themselves, were virtually useless unless accompanied by a horse-drawn darkroom. It was not until the end of the nineteenth century that the wet collodion process gave way to dry plates and celluloid-backed film. These developments, coupled with the introduction of smaller cameras, gave the photographer much more mobility. The speed of the films also increased, allowing faster shutter speeds, which in turn made possible the first true action photographs. When Brady photographed the Civil

Mathew Brady's photographic outfit near Petersburg, Va., during the Civil War.

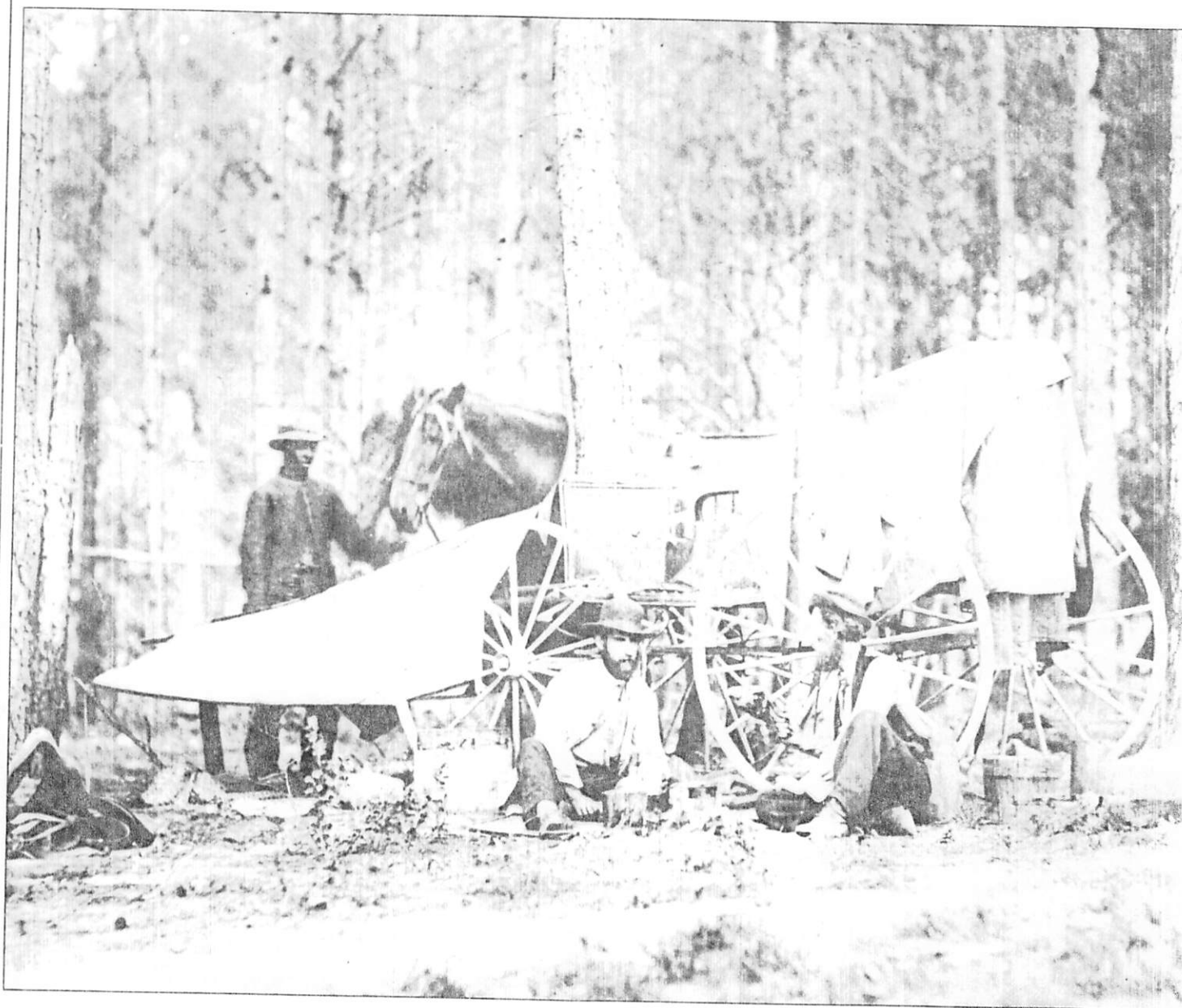
War, his subjects had to be posed. The first action shots were taken about the turn of the century, during the Spanish-American and Boer wars.

Almost simultaneously, American newspapers were able to improve the half-tone process to the point that photographs became staple fare in the daily newspaper. These two technological advances were the essential handmaidens of the lasting marriage of photography and journalism.

The marriage wasn't truly consummated, though, until 1925, the year Leica's 35MM range finder camera went on the market. Although slow to gain wide acceptance in military photography, the 35MM camera was readily embraced by men who would set the standards for the new breed of photojournalists, men

such as Robert Capa, David Seymour, Lucien Aigner, and Alfred Eisenstein. Where the earliest war photographer had to cope with cameras the size of boards plus their mother-ship darkroom, the new breed could tuck a couple of cameras into jacket pockets and photograph virtually anything they saw. Photography at once became more intimate; photographers could get closer to the action and closer to their subjects and closer to danger. This, of course, created a new demand: action photos.

While military photographers could simply be ordered into the action, civilians were constantly exposed to the dangers. Some of the civilian war photographers and correspondents found ways to minimize the hazards while feeding their voracious steady diets of action pictures.



Indeed, there have been accusations (by Philip Knightley in his book *The First Casualty* and by O. D. Gallagher, war correspondent for the London *Daily Express*) that even the most sacred icon of war photography, Robert Capa's *Death of a Loyalist Soldier*, was faked, although there is no positive proof. The picture was taken during the Spanish Civil War in 1936. In earlier times pictures were commonly staged for practical reasons, to accommodate the technical limitations of the camera. By the 1930s, when true action photography was possible, the demands of editors, the restricted access to war zones, and the trepidations of the cameramen led to the staging of some pictures. In Vietnam there were instances of civilian correspondents buying pictures from combat photographers, and it was not uncommon for a correspondent to hire Vietnamese photographers for combat assignments. Also, television reporters were known to hire GI "actors" to stage action backgrounds for their reports. One famous network television correspondent faked an action background right in the middle of the huge Long Binh post, possibly the most sophisticated and secure U.S. base in Vietnam, in a wooded area called "Monkey Jungle."

Not that the military photographers are immune to this affliction: the image-conscious brass would occasionally order both still pictures and motion picture footage tailor-made for public relations purposes or training films. Also, some individual photographers must surely have staged some action shots either to impress their superiors, to sell to civilian correspondents, or to provide war souvenirs for their buddies.

How much of this type of material and its way into the official file is unknown. But we have every confidence that the combat pictures presented in this book are genuine. Many of the individual photographers have been located and have given detailed accounts of the circumstances in which their pictures were taken.

The Vietnam War was a new experience for photojournalists, because for the first time they were allowed to operate with complete freedom. They were not censored and were encouraged to photograph and report on the conflict and were transported by the military to wherever they wanted to go. It was a different

kind of war for America. In the beginning the U.S. did not play a combat role and made a great effort to justify its presence there by emphasizing the "good guy" aspect of the mission. The U.S. wanted the Vietnam story told and invited correspondents to help tell it. Later, the open-eye policy would backfire as the more sordid aspects of the war made their way out to TV screens, front pages, and magazine covers. By then it was too late for censorship. Some correspondents who fell from grace with the U.S. military leaders were barred from Vietnam, but widespread restrictions would only have further inflamed the antiwar movement.

While making coverage of the war easy for civilian correspondents, the U.S. military also assigned hundreds of photographers in uniform to tours in Vietnam to cover the war from within. These men often worked in the same manner as their civilian counterparts and under a broad mandate to fully document the activities of the U.S. military in Southeast Asia. They photographed all branches of the military in all aspects of their lives in Vietnam, and they did so in a way the civilians could not: as insiders, brothers, members of the family. They wore the same uniforms, ate the same food, slept in the same tents, and drew the same pay as the men they were photographing. They also took the same risks and suffered the same casualties. They worked virtually unrestricted in the field, many of them in places and combat situations civilian photographers did not reach. Together, over the years, the combat photographers compiled a large body of work, a valuable record of the way it was in Vietnam.

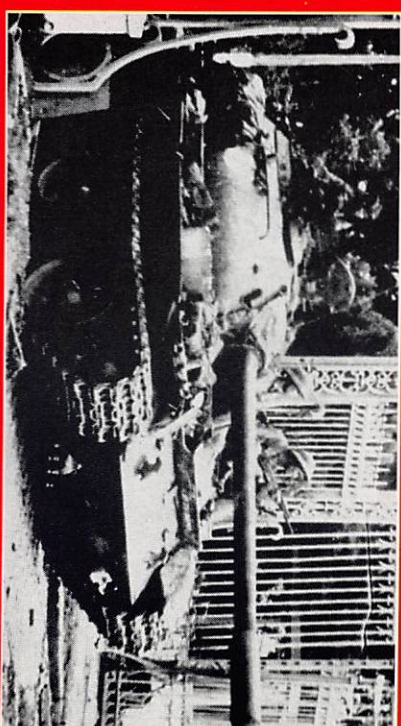
The first military photographers sent to Vietnam were dispatched from the Army Pictorial Center in New York City, where the peacetime army produced documentaries and training films. Enlisted photographers Specialist 5 James Twitty and Sergeant Lucius Croft were assigned in March 1962 to make a quick trip to Vietnam to photograph the activities of the U.S. military advisers who were training the South Vietnamese for their war against the Communist guerrillas, the Vietcong. Twitty and Croft never made it: Their plane vanished without a trace in the Pacific. Another photo team was formed at the APC and made a brief trip to Vietnam, but, as Lieutenant Colonel (ret.) Claude Bache recalls, they only

spent a couple of weeks and didn't accomplish much. Then, Bache says, "the word came down from the Pentagon that we were forming DASPO," the Department of the Army Special Photo Office.

DASPO was born in the spring of 1962 with its headquarters at the APC, and three detachments were formed to give worldwide coverage of army activities. The Pacific detachment set up housekeeping in Saigon and rotated personnel from Honolulu into Vietnam for three-month, or longer, periods. Until the American build-up, when the other branches of the service arrived in force, military photo coverage of the Vietnam War was largely DASPO's responsibility.

When the U.S. sent combat troops to Vietnam in 1965, other photographers arrived with them and DASPO's coverage was augmented by combat photographers from the army, navy, air force, Marine Corps, and the Coast Guard. Brigade-sized units had photographers assigned to their information offices, and these men would go out in the field with the battalions, companies, platoons, or patrols, photographing their activities. Later still, the army formed a purely photographic unit—the 221st Signal Company, which absorbed the photo components of the 69th Signal Battalion and the 593d Signal Battalion. The 221st served as the manpower company for the Southeast Asia Pictorial Center (SEAPC), which was set up like an in-country DASPO. SEAPC had motion picture and still photo capability, its own lab complex for still photo processing and printing, and six permanent detachments from the DMZ to the delta.

In peacetime the navy routinely assigns photographers, called photographer's mates, to cover all navy activities and ceremonies. Early navy advisory duties in Vietnam were photographed by these men. The navy also employed an elite photo operation, the Pacific Fleet Combat Camera Group, which rotated motion picture and still photographers into Vietnam for 120-day tours twice a year. Combat Camera Group-Pacific (CCGPAC) had a detachment in Saigon and lab facilities there and in Cam Ranh Bay and Da Nang. The group had about twenty photographers in Vietnam at all times during the years of the U.S. combat role there, and of those twenty, three or four were still photographers. Some of



THE DOMINO FALLS — Noon, April 30, 1975. A North Vietnamese tank slams through the gates of the presidential palace in Saigon, signaling the end of the independent republic of South Vietnam. Why didn't American battlefield successes amount to overall victory? Who was to blame — the civilian government or the military power structure? Could we have prevented a Communist takeover — and at what cost? Ponder these questions and more in *The Aftermath*.

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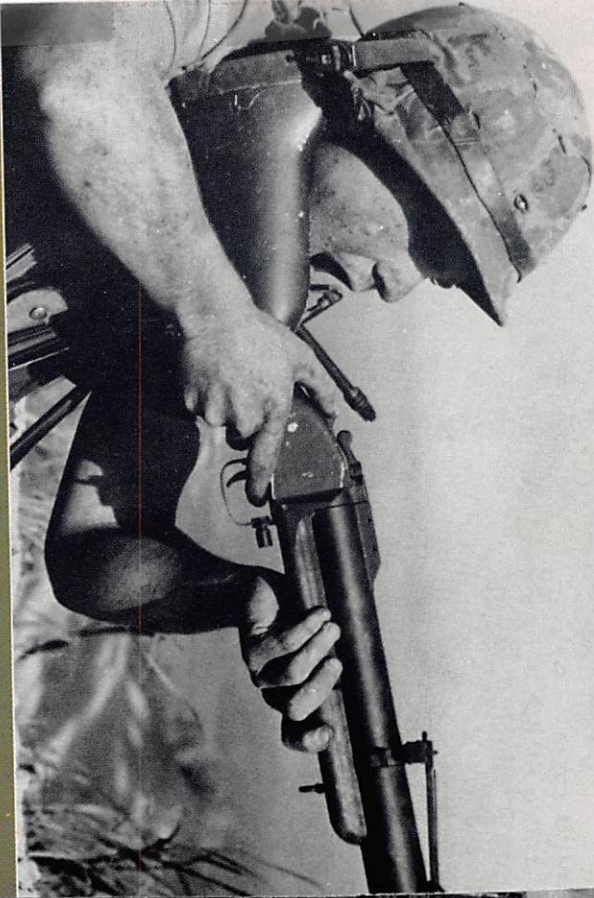
The tunnels created a new job for the U.S. troops: that of "tunnel rat." The rats had to be fairly small men, as were the Vietnamese who dug the tunnels. They also needed the guts to descend alone with flashlight and pistol (a rifle was too awkward in the tunnels) into the dark, twisting passageways to find the enemy. An encounter with the Vietcong could be deadly. The firing of a weapon or the blast of a grenade in a tunnel could cause concussion and deafness—and those were but the minor consequences of tunnel combat.

Another specialized soldier was the scout dog handler. The dogs could hear and smell things that humans could not.

They were credited with saving many lives by sniffing out enemy soldiers, tunnels, booby traps, and supply caches. The scout dogs and their handlers shared close relationships.

There were a number of small, specialized units in Vietnam that operated in shadowy and secretive ways, such as Navy SEAL (Sea, Air, and Land) teams; long range patrols, which would spend a week or more in the field observing enemy movements; and snipers who fought the war one well-placed shot at a time, in marked contrast to the frenzied firing of a rifleman in a firefight.

THE VI



AGAINST ALL ODDS—Outnumbered at least four to one, but ordered to hold "at all costs," American Marines successfully withstood a 77-day siege at Khe Sanh — only to abandon the base two months later. At one point, fearing the battle could become an American Dien Bien Phu, General Westmoreland considered the use of nuclear weapons, then rejected the idea—unless the situation changed dramatically. Here, a Marine armed with an M79 launches a grenade toward the enemy.



A group of Navy SEALs, unwinding after a daring daylight raid, shows off its battle trophy—a

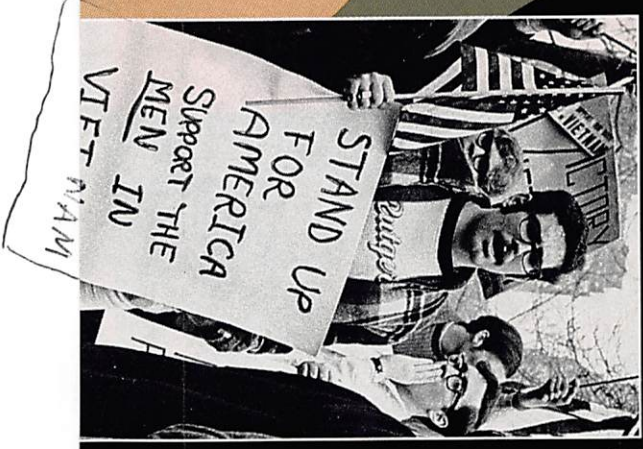
Little
up

**IT WAS HELL IN A SMALL PLACE--
WHERE THE ONLY RULES WERE THE
ONES YOU MADE YOURSELF...**

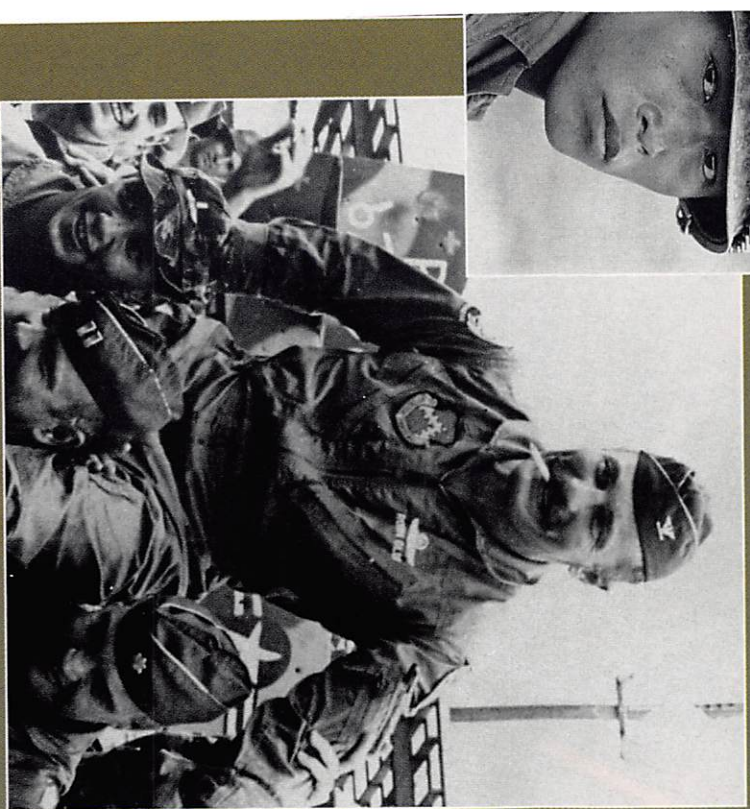
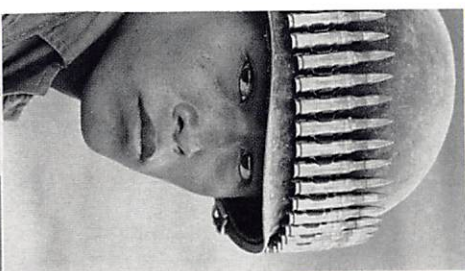


A group of Navy SEALs, unwinding after a daring daylight raid, shows off its battle trophy—a captured Viet Cong flag.

of people at home. "America—Love It or Leave It" became the clarion call of millions of Stateside flag-wavers.

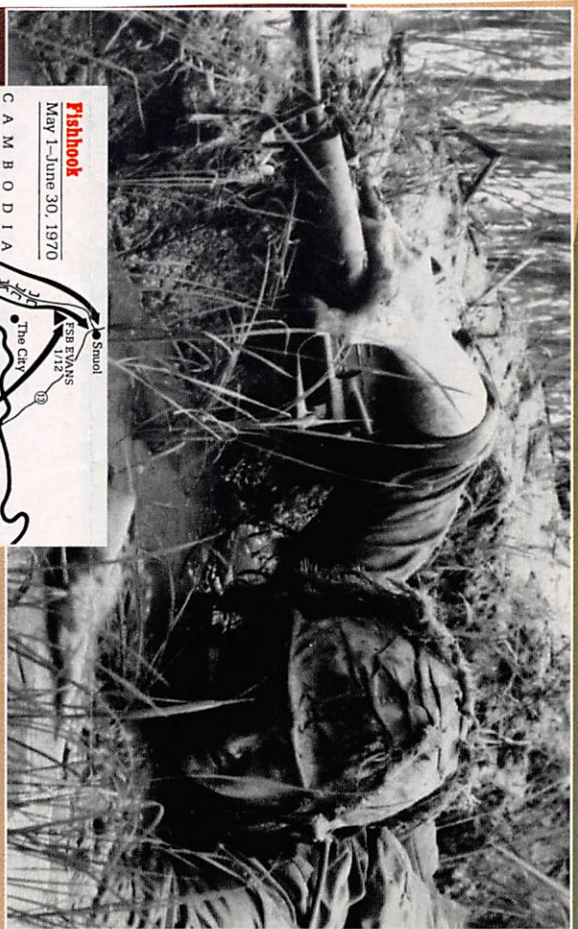


THE ALLY—By the early 1970s, "Vietnamization" had shifted the burden of battle from the Americans to the South Vietnamese—and set the stage for Communist victory. Here, a youthful South Vietnamese paratrooper—his helmet crowned with rifle ammo—seems to mirror the confusion that marked the entire war.

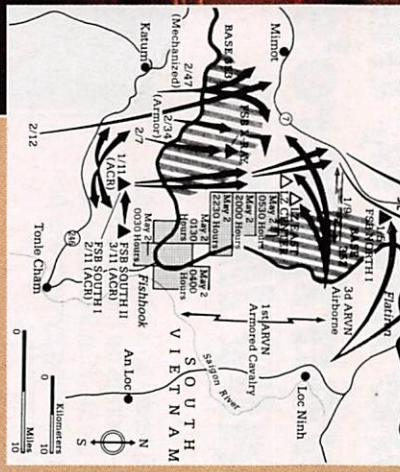


SKY JOCKEY—Maverick air ace Colonel Robin Olds is swept up by his men after flying his one hundredth, and final, combat mission in 1967. Earlier that year, during Operation Bolo, Olds and his fellow pilots downed seven MiGs, prompting comedian Bob Hope to dub the Phantom jockeys

Lift up



Fishhook
May 1–June 30, 1970



MASHER/WHITE WING—Early 1966, and American forces launch Operation Masher/White Wing to root out the North Vietnamese 3rd Division. The tactical success of the offensive proved to be short-lived, as within a week of Masher/White Wing's conclusion, VC were already reinfiltrating the area—exemplifying one of the problems that plagued American strategists throughout the war. Here, a 1st Air Cav soldier ducks enemy sniper fire while crossing a rice paddy.

THE



FLYING TELEPHONE POLE—Russian-made North Vietnamese SA-2 missiles could reach nearly 10 miles into the sky to bring down American jets. Radar-controlled and capable of flying twice the speed of sound, these surface-to-air missiles and other anti-aircraft defenses helped turn North Vietnam's Red River Valley into "Slaughter Alley."

THE MIRACLE
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